

DOROTHY DAY

1897-1980

DOROTHY DAY IS A MODEL FOR OUR TIME FOR SEVERAL REASONS. First, because she was peculiarly, deeply, and undeniably American, and thus brought a very special character to her life as a Christian. Although she loved Russian, French, British, and Italian novelists—particularly Dostoevsky, George Bernanos, Dickens, Orwell, and Ignazio Silone—she was a child of the American experience, and her religious commitment as well as her vocation was bound up with this country. Her early family life, which was casually religious, her formal education in public schools and at the University of Illinois, as well as her admiration for William James's *Varieties of Religious Experience*, shaped her sensibility. She was a disciple of the American radical tradition, persistently anarchist and religious, from Thomas Paine to Martin Luther King, Jr. Her close association with The Masses, Mike Gold, and Ammon Hennacy—as well as her admiration for Eugene Victor Debs, Emma Goldman, and Elizabeth Gurley Flynn—was formative and enduring. Peter Maurin, a French peasant, was her teacher once she became a Catholic; but her temper was in the American grain.

Second, because she was a member of the laity. Unlike many religious figures held up for imitation to young people, she was not a cleric. She belonged to that group that emerged as a shaping force in the church at the time of the Second Vatican Council. As a 20th century heroine who faced the anxieties and challenges of a violent century, she was not so far removed from us as to appear foreign or aloof.

Third, because she failed, like most people, at many things—as a wife, in an early marriage, and perhaps as a parent. Although many of us see Dorothy Day as triumphant, as a success, one must acknowledge also her judgment of her life in *The Long Loneliness* (1952): "I feel that I have done nothing well. But

I have done what I could." She often said that she took on certain responsibilities only because others (Peter Maurin, Ammon Hennacy, Karl Meyer) pushed them upon her. Although faithful and resilient, she never pretended to be all-knowing or all-powerful.

Sometimes the only thing that keeps a woman going is the necessity of taking care of her young. She cannot sink into lethargy and despair because the young ones are dragging at her skirts, clamoring for something—food, clothing, shelter, occupation. She is carried outside herself.

Fourth, because she was a writer, the kind of writer that the language needs at this moment. She understood the power of everyday speech, and wrote in a manner that was understandable to everyone. Although she had a complex and demanding message to communicate, she fashioned a style that shunned pretension, artifice, or "rhetoric" in order to convey that message. On the works of mercy, she wrote, for example: "Martyrdom is not gallantly standing before a firing squad. Usually it is the losing of a job because of not taking a loyalty oath or buying a war bond, or paying a tax. Martyrdom is small, hidden, misunderstood." Elsewhere, in a meditation on the virtue of obedience, she said:

Obedience is a matter of love, which makes it voluntary, not compelled by fear or force. Pope John's motto was "Obedience and Peace." Yet he was the pope who flouted conventions which had hardened into laws as to what a pope could and could not do, and the Pharisees were scandalized and the people delighted.

Fifth, because she internalized values associated with peace and justice and gave them substance. In her devotion to voluntary poverty, to nonviolence, and to the radical reconstruction of the social order, she lived among workers, radicals, prisoners, and the down and out. For Christians, she came as a great shock. Here, in the life and vocation of one woman were

the values that had been held up to church members, but often by people who did not embody them. Through her, the words became flesh: devotion to the poor, resistance to war, vulnerability toward circumstance, and charity to everyone.

Born in Brooklyn, on November 8, 1897, Dorothy Day lived briefly in San Francisco, but grew up in Chicago, where her father worked as a journalist. At 15, she won a scholarship to the University of Illinois and there became a socialist. Two years later, she returned to New York City, where she lived most of her life. As a young radical, she was arrested with the Wobblies (Industrial Workers of the World) and the suffragettes, as she was later with war resisters and United Farm Workers. During World War I, she wrote for the *Masses* and during the 20s lived in Greenwich Village, where she became friends with Eugene O'Neill, Malcolm and Peggy Cowley, Allen Tate, Caroline Gordon, and Kenneth Burke. At that time, she worked as a nurse, wrote a novel, *The Eleventh Virgin*, married, and lived briefly in Mexico.

In 1926, Day's conversion to Catholicism led to her separation from her second husband, Foster Batterham, and to a break with some of her radical friends. During those years, she supported herself and her only daughter, Tamar Teresa, by writing for *America*, *Commonweal*, and other periodicals.

On May 1, 1933, five months after meeting Peter Maurin, Dorothy Day founded *The Catholic Worker*, a monthly newspaper dedicated to making known "the expressed and implied teachings of Christ." It is published today, as it was over fifty years ago, at a penny a copy, with a circulation of 100,000. In the years between 1933 and her death in December 1980, Dorothy Day lived at various Houses of Hospitality and Catholic Worker farms near New York City, edited the newspaper, wrote five books, and spoke frequently at colleges, universities, churches and Catholic Worker communities throughout the United States.

Over those decades, she emerged as the most remarkable person in the history of American Catholicism and in some ways the most influential. Although few people managed, like her, to make a total commitment to voluntary poverty, personalism,

or Christian anarchism, they often learned a great deal from her, and some went on to significant vocations modeled on her example.

Through her work—feeding the poor and housing the homeless, through her newspaper and her monthly column, "On Pilgrimage," and through her war tax resistance and civil disobedience, Dorothy Day touched the lives of numerous people: workers, intellectuals, students, clergy, and women of three generations. Among the writers and editors who, at various times, helped to edit *Catholic Worker* are Michael Harrington, author of *The Other America*; John Cogley, James O'Gara, and John Cort, editors of *Commonweal*; Tom Cornell and James Forest, co-founders of the Catholic Peace Fellowship; James Cook, author of *Rags of Time: A Season and Prison*: as well as a host of other artists and radicals who contributed to its pages: Ammon Hennacy, W. H. Auden, Gordon Zahn, Ade Bethume, Thomas Merton, Daniel Berrigan, Philip Berrigan, Eileen Egan, Fritz Eichenberg, Rita Corbin.

When Dorothy Day died, December 1980, she was mourned by the down-and-out in Manhattan, whom she fed and clothed, as well as by the great and famous, including the cardinal archbishop of New York, who came to bless her coffin. Many regard her as a saint.

BY DOROTHY DAY

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ABOUT DOROTHY DAY

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